



**CITY OF SAN ANTONIO
OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL
COUNCIL CONSIDERATION REQUEST**

TO: Mayor and City Council

FROM: Councilman Ron Nirenberg, District 8

COPIES TO: Sheryl Sculley, City Manager; Leticia Vacek, City Clerk; Edward Benavides, Chief of Staff; Chris Callanen, Assistant to the City Council; Robbie Greenblum, City Attorney; John Peterek, Senior Management Analyst

SUBJECT: Edwards Aquifer and Water Supply Planning

DATE: February 6, 2014

Issue Proposed for Consideration

I ask for your support for inclusion of the following item on the earliest available meeting of the Governance Committee:

Directing staff to research and publish a comprehensive report on all City policies, procedures, standards, regulations, and initiatives involving the cost, quantity and quality of the water drawn from the Edwards Aquifer. Water security – ensuring affordable, abundant, and clean sources of water for future generations of San Antonians – is the most basic and important element of economic quality and vitality of life for our citizens. Therefore, the goal of this study and report is a long term planning initiative to provide for affordable and adequate supplies of water to support the needs of San Antonians and the economic development of the San Antonio region through the year 2050. This report should include as a minimum, a plan to provide affordable rates and abundant clean water to San Antonians; to determine how the City protects the Edwards Aquifer as its main source of drinking water; and how City growth policies impact the management and operation of the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) and vice versa; and any recommendations for changes or improvements.

As part of this analysis of current city policy, staff should consider and report on the costs and benefits of particular policies as they relate to the cost of our water, the impact of water policies and water supplies on both economic growth and the protection of our water supply, how policies align with the goals of the State and South Central Texas Regional Water Plans (Texas Water Development Board), how policies conflict or complement the City's growth/annexation plans and projected growth of water demand, and how policies impact financial risk and rate inflation borne on City residents and ratepayers.

Over the last several years, the rate structure for SAWS in San Antonio attempts to strike a balance between residential and business rates, and to strengthen conservation pricing for all water users. Despite this policy, San Antonians have seen increases in their costs for water and have seen various restrictions imposed on their usage of water during times of drought and decreased rainfall. The cost and supply for San Antonio's water will become even more critical in the future if we continue to experience drought conditions that are even worse than those on record in the 1950s and if we continue to face new lows for rainfall throughout the year. We must comprehensively address the issues concerning our most valuable resource.

Brief Background

The Edwards Aquifer sits below thousands of acres across several counties in Central and South Texas, and it serves as the primary water source for the City of San Antonio and neighboring communities. It is composed of three zones: Contributing, Recharge, and Artesian. The Contributing Zone collects rainfall in the Edwards Plateau of the Texas Hill Country, and water flows down through the porous, permeable limestone of the Recharge Zone. Prolific springs and natural wells, caves, sinkholes, and other karst features are characteristic of the Recharge Zone that spans across northern Bexar County. The southern Artesian Zone comprises the largest surface area of the aquifer, and water passes through slowly due to the thick layer of clay and rock in the ground.

The City of San Antonio has experienced, and will continue to experience, rapid growth over the Recharge Zone, leading to local, regional, and statewide efforts to manage development in these sensitive areas and encourage water supply diversification. Nevertheless, the Edwards Aquifer is – and will continue to be – the preeminent source of water for San Antonio and surrounding communities: 90 percent of the water supply for the San Antonio Water System comes from the Edwards Aquifer. And as such, the Edwards Aquifer is a top concern for households in San Antonio because it is the primary source of water for household needs, it is critical for the economic well-being of the San Antonio community; and because businesses depend on it for their operations, keeping Edwards water plentiful grows more critical and more challenging each year. In December of 2013, the Dallas Federal Bank cited water scarcity as “one of the most pressing economic issues facing the state.” Improper planning would have dire consequences for our City as a whole and will cost taxpayers unnecessarily.

For decades, there has been a consensus that the City must engage in a delicate balancing act between economic development in sensitive regions and the protection of Aquifer water quality and flow. The San Antonio City Council first adopted the concept of Recharge Zone protection in 1975, instituting by ordinance a zoning overlay for that portion of the aquifer. In 1987, the city council produced a document entitled “The Edwards Aquifer: Perspectives for Local and Regional Action,” endorsing a plan for non-degradation of the aquifer to protect ground water supplies within the city’s jurisdiction. In 1994, the council adopted a more comprehensive approach, “The Edwards Aquifer: San Antonio Mandates for Water Quality Protection (33 Mandates),” which called for various actions in a regional watershed plan that considered federal, state, and local rules.

City residents have recognized the challenge of managing our primary water source and, since 2000, have overwhelmingly approved the Edwards Aquifer Protection Program three times, designating sales tax revenue to purchase conservation easements in the Recharge Zone. This program, which has been held as a model regionally and nationally, has led to the protection of over 100,000 acres of the Recharge Zone, equivalent to over 10 percent of the zone.

These efforts notwithstanding, the City’s policies related to water security and Edwards protection remain scattershot and, at times, inconsistent with our vision for guaranteeing affordable and abundant water for San Antonians and for the growth of San Antonio.

The City designated SAWS as its agent for enforcing environmental regulations. SAWS is committed to a growth policy in order to sustain an expanding population in the City and accompanying revenue requirements.

In 2002, the City Council established an ad hoc Committee on Water Quality to review the

existing aquifer protection ordinance, recognizing the need to not only review regulations periodically, but also that the foundation of our region's economy – and the growth of San Antonio – will ignore increasing threats to the Edwards Aquifer at its own peril. The committee was composed of various stakeholders from neighborhoods, businesses, the development community, and environmental organizations, and it considered impervious cover limits, floodplain buffers, extension of protections within the Contributing Zone, use of water quality basins, sensitive land acquisition, underground storage tanks, research, and public education about aquifer protection. Despite the importance of its charge and the fact that improvements were identified, the committee was unable to reach consensus on recommendations to be adopted in a final report. The city council adopted various intermediary measures in 2006, and the committee dissolved.

The conflict presented by the need for abundant and affordable water, aquifer protection and growth of water utility services in the region underscores the importance of various City policies that affect water security, one of the world's primary long-term natural resource challenges. The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas has confirmed that water scarcity is a threat to long-term economic viability, and while economic growth is a contributing factor to this challenge, it can also be its victim. This threatens every family and every business in our region.

Local governments in Texas have understood this problem and responded through conservation efforts, acquiring water rights, diversifying supplies, and expanding service as a business imperative. SAWS has responded through similar initiatives as well, including a Brackish Groundwater Desalinization Program, acquisition of Edwards Aquifer pumping rights, the Regional Carrizo Water Supply Program, and Aquifer Storage and Recovery. In January, the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts heralded SAWS' efforts as models for other municipalities statewide. Yet, while water source diversification is a worthy pursuit, it will not supplant the preeminence of the Edwards Aquifer to the City's water security. Acquisition of water rights and the expansion of service area by providers across the region reaffirm the importance of insuring our water sources. This pursuit is fundamental to our ability to encourage economic growth.

A comprehensive study examining City policy that impacts water costs, quantity, quality, and planning is needed at this critical time in our City's history. Through this analysis, we can better understand the opportunities to secure our water quality and quantity, complement our vision for the growth of the City, and make policy decisions accordingly for the benefit of every citizen and business in San Antonio.

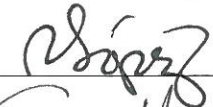
Submitted for Council consideration
by:


Councilman Ron Nirenberg, District 8

Supporting Councilmember's Signatures (4 only)

District No.

1.



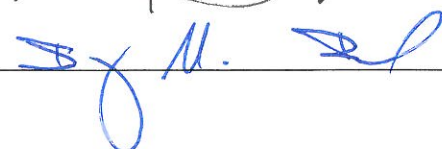
6

2.



4

3.



1

4.

Chp.

7